England, Islam, and the Mediterranean Drama: *Othello* and Others

Lawrence Danson

I want to complicate the oppositions—East versus West, Ottoman versus European, Muslim versus Christian—which tend to structure critical discussions of England’s Mediterranean drama in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. (By “Mediterranean drama” I mean both the plays set in the region and also the less obviously scripted drama enacted in the Mediterranean theater of commerce, diplomacy, and warfare.) Englishmen abroad, in North Africa and the Levant, had to negotiate, not a single world of Islamic difference, but a whole world of unstable, relationally shifting differences. They were latecomers: Queen Elizabeth chartered the Levant Company in 1581, by which time England’s European rivals were already well established in the eastern and southern trade. Simply to reach their destinations they had to pass the threat of Spanish interference in the west. Their encounters with Islam were mediated by their European rivalries: they construed Islamic difference in light of Catholic difference; they encountered Turks and Moors (the fluidity of the two terms is very much to the point) either as their rivals’ allies, enemies or objects of commercial desire. This triangulated mode of engagement helps explain why modern efforts to fix “the image” of the Turk, the Moor, the Jew—the famously elusive “other” of critical discourse—occasionally feel inadequate to the unfixedness of the historical actuality.¹ The proverbially lustful Turk could on occasion seem a model of rectitude in a space also occupied by oversexed Frenchmen or Italians; in the treachery department, it could be a toss-up between Moors, on the one hand, and Spanish or Portuguese, on the other; the Jewish dog
could be an Englishman's best friend when he became the middleman in the intricacies of eastern business; while even the usually unbridgeable divide between Protestant and Catholic might disappear where both were threatened by the ubiquitous equalizer of slavery.

The plays of the period, however fantastic in other respects, reflect the cosmopolitan, polyglot nature of a region where the other is always others and in process of becoming something other again. Marlowe's play about a Jew of Malta is also about the Catholic Knights of Malta, and about the competing imperial ambitions of Spaniards and Ottoman Turks; while the depressingly leveled population on offer in its slave-market comes from all points on the Mediterranean map. The characters act as if they knew the differences between one another but those same actions suggest that, from the English audience's point of view, there is actually little to choose between, morally or in terms of economic alliance. Peele's The Battle of Alcazar makes the English adventurer Thomas Stukeley ahistorically central to its depiction of diplomatic treachery and a disastrous war involving Portuguese, Spanish, and Moors—the latter themselves divided into warring factions. Its plot is loosely based on an actual history of intricate diplomatic involvements among African Muslims, European Catholics, and one free-booting Englishman who manages to be both an Elizabethan hero and an agent of the papacy's desire to wrest Ireland from English dominance. Thomas Heywood's The Fair Maid of the West, Parts I and II has a dreamlike adventure plot which moves from England to Fez to Florence, and involves Englishmen (and an incredibly plucky English woman), Moors, and Italians, almost any one of whom may, depending on circumstances, be alternately idealized or demonized. Plays such as these create a world unlike insular England not only because it contains Turks, Moors, Jews, and Christians of both the Protestant and Catholic variants, but because it contains them, as it were, all at once, in changing relations and configurations which confound the illusion that a stable us is always distinct from a definable them.

Even when there are no English characters literally present in the plot, the Mediterranean (and, to be precise, Aegean) drama tends to suggest an inexhaustible elsewhere teeming with differences that refuse to remain constant. The Merchant of Venice, localized in the conflict of Venetian Christian and alien Jew, invokes an imaginative geography of vast reach. Antonio's ships ply their dangerous trade "From Tripolis, from Mexico, and England, From Lisbon, Barbary, and India" (3.2.268-69). In
Bassanio’s adventurous imagining, Portia’s Belmont is relocated to the eastern shore of the Black Sea, and becomes the destination for travelers world-wide:

For the four winds blow in from every coast  
Renowned suitors, and her sunny locks  
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,  
Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchis’ strand,  
And many Jasons come in quest of her.  

(1.1.168-172)

One of those Jasons is in fact the Prince of Morocco, “a tawny Moor” (2.1.1 s.d), whose scimitar has slain the Persian Sophy and “won three fields from Sultan Solyman” (2.1.26). On the principle that my enemy’s enemy is my friend, this scourge of Islam could be a fine match for Portia; but in this instance, “complexion” and endogamy trump military alliance, and the white Christian Venetian Bassanio wins the white Christian Venetian Portia. Still, the play requires all of Portia’s forensic talent to decide the competing claims of justice between Antonio and Shylock: from one point of view, the problem is not that the Christian and the Jew are antithetical but that there is too little difference between the money-men. Portia, in judicial disguise, asks to have the parties to the dispute identified: “Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?” It takes not only a legal judgment but all the mystifying music of Act 5 to lock the difference in place.

Things are very different in Othello, the play I’ll be taking my cues from in what follows. The troubling question of who’s in, who’s out, who’s us and who’s other, remains unsettled from Othello’s first scene through the implied future after Act 5: the letters from Cyprus that “shall these unlucky deeds relate” will never be able to “speak of [Othello] as I am,” with nothing extenuated and nought set down in malice (5.2.350-353). For the characters in the play, and for its critics, the problem of describing Othello “as I am” is inextricable from the complexities of relational Mediterranean identities. When Shakespeare adapted Cinthio’s Italian tale of the gallant Moor, his virtuous lady, and the wicked ensign, he broadened its geographical reach. Othello ranges not only from Venice to Cyprus but southward to a Mandevillian region of anters vast and deserts idle; west to Mauritania where, Iago falsely claims, Othello intends to “[take] away with him the fair Desdemona” (4.2.232-233); east to Egypt where a sibyl sewed the talismanic handkerchief, and from there to Aleppo in the northeastern corner of the Mediterranean world, where Othello
finds his "journey's end . . . [the] butt/ And very sea-mark of [his] utmost sail" (5.2.276-277)—the imaginary mise-en-scène for his real act of self-destruction. In Othello, where a Moor is "an honourable murderer" (5.2.302), where a white Venetian is a villain, where the "general enemy Ottoman" (1.3.51) is both out there and in here, any assumption of stable difference between self and other, insider and outsider, Christian and Muslim, white and black is threatened by the omnipresence of subversive third parties.

I am going to use Othello as the occasion for looking at some ostensibly non-fictional accounts by English merchants and travelers in the Ottoman empire. I do not propose these as sources for Othello, nor do I claim that all of them would have been known to Shakespeare's audience. (Some appeared before, others after the play.) I invoke these accounts to suggest some ways in which the English idea of Islam had to encompass a range of othernesses; their stories complicate the idea of a monolithic Englishness versus a subaltern empire of Muslim Turks.

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I begin where Othello ends, reenacting on his own body the deadly encounter with his enemy, his semblable and frère:

in Aleppo once,
   Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
   Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
   I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
   And smote him, thus. (5.2.362-366)

Why Aleppo, of all places? Commentators have said little about this apparitional Syrian city. Honigmann, the editor of Arden 3, refuses to speculate: "Not mentioned before, Aleppo reminds us that much of Othello's past remains a closed book" (xxx). But the warning is also a provocation. Michael Neill has written about "the habit of obsessive speculation about concealed offstage action, into which the play entraps the viewer as it entraps its characters" (397). The play solicits us to imagine the bodies on the bed, to read the interior spaces of another's mind; and, perhaps less sexily, it invites us to explore the geographical places of Othello's wheeling strangeness, to trace his travels' history to the real places of his fictional creation.

In 1583, two years after the founding of the Levant Company, the English merchant John Eldred made his way to Aleppo via Tripoli on the Syrian coast. At Tripoli he found a harbor busy "with Christian marchants, to wit, Venetians, Genouois,
Florentines, Marsilians, Sicilians, Raguses and lately with Englishmen" (Hakluyt 6:2). And when he traveled on by caravan to Aleppo, he entered a city of astonishing cultural and ethnic diversity: "This is the greatest place of traffique for a dry towne that is in all those parts: for hither resort Jewes, Tartarians, Persians, Armenians, Egyptians, Indians, and many sorts of Christians, and enjoy freedome of their consciences, and bring hither many kinds of rich marchandises" (Hakluyt 6:2). In the Ottoman east, that is to say, he found a scene of cultural diversity unequaled anywhere in the west except, perhaps, in Venice—the western mirror-site to Aleppo. Travelers tended to describe the two cities in similar terms: in both places, the Englishman found a wondrous tumult of races and nations, similarly evoked in the rhetoric of the list, with its implication that the paratactic contents could go on endlessly. The indefatigably self-promoting English traveler Thomas Coryat wrote that in the piazza of St. Mark's "you may see all manner of fashions of attire, and heare all the languages of Christendome besides those that are spoken by the barbarous Ethnikes. ... [Y]ou may see many Polonians, Slavonians, Persians, Grecians, Jewes, Christians of all the famousest regions of Christendome, and each nation distinguished from another by their proper and peculiar habits. A singular shew, and by many degrees the worthiest of all the European countries." He credited what the proverb said of St. Mark's: "a man may very properly call it rather Orbis then Urbis forum, that is, a market place of the world, not of the citie" (Crudities 1:314, 318). To find its like you would have to go (as Coryat, and Othello, did) to Aleppo, "the principall emporium of the Orient world."7

In 1596, thirteen years after the visit by the pioneering Eldred, Fynes Moryson also visited "the famous Citie of Haleppo," and found that English traders were making good headway against their European competitors. Moryson and his brother were entertained by "the English Merchants living in three houses, as it were in Colledges" (Moryson 2:59). As Moryson traces it, the recent history of the European mercantile presence in Aleppo is an epitome of recent European diplomatic history:

The Trafficke in this place is exceeding great, so as the goods of all Asia and the Easterne Ilands are brought thither, or to Cayro in Egypt. ... And the Venetians and some free cities of Italy solly enjoyed all this trafficke, of old. But after that time, the Portugals, trading in East India, served all Europe with these commodities ... cutting off most of this trafficke from the
Italians. At last the French King, making league with the Great Turke, the Merchants of [Marseilles] were made partners of this traffike, and in our age the English, under the Raigne of Queene Elizabeth, obtained like priviledge, though great opposition was made against them by the Venetians & French Merchants. And the Turkey company in London was at this time the richest of all the other, silently enjoying the safety and profit of this traffike. (Moryson 2:60) 8

In this account, Aleppo is not the venue for a Turks versus the Rest of the World match but for the economic contention of major European powers, Venetian, Portuguese, and French. (There's a hint of bitterness in Moryson's implied distinction between the on-the-spot English merchants and the investors in London, who "silently" and in "safety" profit from the traffic.) England's belated appearance as a contender in Aleppo corresponds to England's incipient emergence as a major player elsewhere in the world arena.

The rivals in Aleppo kept distance and difference between themselves; they have little sense of a common Europeanness to oppose against a united Islam. According to the clergyman William Biddulph, "There are here spoken so many several Languages as there are several Nations here dwelling or sojourning, every Nation (amongst themselves) speaking their own language" (Purchas 8:271). The English presence in Aleppo may have been increasing, but Biddulph still reports that "of all Christian languages, the Italian tongue is most used, and therewithall a man may travell furthest" (Purchas 8:262).

Like the other English visitors, Biddulph provides a cosmopolitan census for Aleppo, which in 1600 "is inhabited by Turkes, Moores, Arabians, Jewes, Greekes, Armenians, Chelfalines, Nostranes and people of sundry other Nations" (Purchas 8: 262). As for Othello's countrymen in Aleppo, Biddulph makes a startling claim: "The Moores are more ancient dwellers in Aleppo then Turkes, and more foward and zealous in Mahometisme then Turkes: yea all the Church-men amongst the Turkes are Moores (whom the Turkes count a base people in regard to themselves, and call them Tots)" (Purchas 8:262). In Biddulph's reading, the imperialist Ottomans are late-comers to a city in which Muslim orthodoxy is guarded by indigenous "Moors." A similar claim—so similar that it may be the result of plagiarism—was made by William Lithgow: "The Turkish Priests are for the most part
Moores, whom they account to be a base people in respect of themselves, calling them Totseks” (143). So the so-called Moors of Aleppo are religious leaders but social inferiors. Both Biddulph and Lithgow may be confused on this issue: conceivably they’re thinking of native Mamluks who were colonized by the Ottoman Turks in 1516; but if so, it’s the kind of confusion or conflation Shakespeare’s audience might also make in the matter of his Moorship’s Moorishness. We know how flexible the term could be in designating everything from “tawny” or even “white” inhabitants of Spain and North Africa to so-called “Negroes.” The “Moor” in the discourse of English travelers is a cosmos—white, tawny, and black; Muslim, idolator, even Christian—all in one categorical potential. In the English travelers’ usage, Aleppo is a place where a Muslim Turkish Moor might very well confront a Christian Venetian Moor—as Othello, in his account, confronts both himself and his other when he smites the turbaned Turk. The scene in Aleppo that Othello invokes puts the binaries of black-and-white and of Turk-and-Christian under greatest pressure, and threatens to reveal other worlds of difference (racial, national, religious) obscured by those colonizing binaries. In Othello’s scene, Turk, Moor, and Christian identities lose their distinctiveness in Aleppo’s metropolitan, but deadly, embrace.

John Eldred mentions the “freedom of conscience” he observed in Aleppo. Such freedom was not self-evidently a good thing to some Englishmen in 1600, whose own culture tended to be one of rigorous exclusions. In fact, the Ottoman authorities did maintain strict limits on that freedom: they tolerated a diversity of practice only to the extent that it promoted domestic tranquillity and commercial prosperity. Still, a Londoner would never have had the experience William Lithgow had in Constantinople in 1610: there, he noted, you could hear “three Sabboths together, in one weeke: the Friday for the Turkes, the Saturday for the Iewes; and the Sunday for the Christians.” For this militantly Protestant Scotsman, the experience is not a lesson about the benefits of toleration but a chance to be indignant about how irreligiously the Turks keep their Sabbath, “for they will not spare to do any labour on their Holy Day” (142). As to the third sabbath: the large number of Jews in Ottoman cities would have been as strange to British travelers as anything else they encountered. William Biddulph explains the Ottoman policy of in-gathering which accounts for the Jewish—but not only Jewish—presence in Constantinople:

Muhammed [II], after he had taken the city [1453], resolving to keep there the seat of his empire, . . . caused to be brought
thither, out of all the provinces and cities by him conquered, a certain number of men, women, and children, with their faculties and riches, whom he permitted to live according to the institutions and precepts of such religion as it pleased them to observe, and to exercise with all safety their handicrafts and merchandise: which ministered an occasion unto an infinite number of Jews and Maranes [Marranos], driven out of Spain, to come and dwell there; by means whereof in very short time the city began to increase in traffic, riches, and abundance of people. (Travels in Parker 86-87)

Biddulph mentions the expulsion of the Jews from Spain; much further back in time (1290) was the expulsion from England. In Ottoman countries, Englishmen could see, not only an alien Muslim culture, but a long-alienated Jewish culture that had once been vibrant from London to York.

Thomas Coryat, always open to new experience, actively sought out the Jews of Syria and Turkey, as in earlier travels he did the Jews of Venice. He wrote a detailed description of a Succoth celebration in Constantinople. For the most part it is sympathetic; but like Lithgow on the Muslims' sloppy observation of their Sabbath, Coryat is finicky about what he takes to be the unseemliness of Jewish worship. Again, the comparison with Venice is notable: "I find the irreverence of the Jewes in Venice, & of those in Constantinople to be like in the service of God." Coryat was offended by the fact that "They neither uncover nor kneel," and his Anglican fastidiousness guides this description of the Jewish practice of dovening: "they alwayes mooved their bodies up and dowe very strangely, the head being in continuall motion without any cessation. After that they moove their right side then their left and lastly their forepart forward; which kind of wagging of their bodies by interchangeable turnes they use during the whole time of their service" (Coryat in Purchas 10:432-33).

Yet Coryat was fascinated by the Jews. One of his encounters testifies to the categorical instabilities which complicate national, religious, ethnic and racial identities in the cosmopolitan east. He was brought by a mutual friend "to the house of a certaine English Jew, called Amis, born in the Crootched Friars in London" (Coryat in Purchas 10:427). Amis had lived in England for thirty years and had been in Constantinople for thirty more yet Coryat still considers him "English," something he would have been less likely to do had Amis continued living in England. Amis, "for the love he bore our English Nation," invited Coryat "to see a matter, which in my former travells I wished to have seene, especially in Venice,
but never till then had the opportunitie to attaine unto, namely a circumcision." Coryat describes the bris without any apparent animus. He explains that the infant's pain, though bitter, would be cured in twenty-four hours. And then his account enacts an interesting slippage, as an anxious parenthesis elides Jewish custom with Muslim and suddenly brings Christians into the scene: "But those of any riper yeeres that are circumcised (as it too often commeth to passe, that Christians which turne Turkes) as at for-tie or fiftie yeeres of age, doe suffer great paine for the space of a moneth" (Coryat in Purchas 10:427).

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If, as Coryat reports, it hurt the renegade who turned Turk, it apparently hurt the faithful more. Othello's rebuke to the drunken brawlers disturbing the tenuous peace of Cyprus's dark night—

Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that
Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?
For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl
(2.3.164-166)

—metaphorically puts the "Turk" in the Christians' bodily space; and it asks us what is implied by the English notion of being—or rather, and provocatively, becoming—a Turk.11 The phrase was a cliché, usually carrying with it no more precise notion of the wickedness involved than the similar notion of becoming a Jew. (The latter phrase usually appears as part of a conditional construction: thus Benedick in Much Ado About Nothing, "If I do not love her, I am a Jew" or, most mind-bendingly, Launcelot in The Merchant of Venice, "I am a Jew if I serve the Jew any longer.") An Englishman (or a fictional Italian) didn't have to lose a foreskin to turn Turk; he only had to emulate any of his stereotypical negative qualities, by being cruel or treacherous or sexually immoderate. (And a woman could turn Turk by acting like a whore [Rice 153-54].) But you could also turn Turk by actually taking up with the Turks, as in going native, and in the extreme by converting to Islam.12 In that sense the phrase was not just a cliché: it referred to an actual situation of alarmingly frequent occurrence. It said, not as metaphor but as historical fact, that Turkishness was both a matter of essential traits but also, contradictorily, a condition that can be acquired. So while a Jew, by leaving England for Turkey, could become a Briton's countryman, an Englishman through contact with Muslims could become a Turk. In the east, a Christian found that Christianity was a precarious
ground for identity; it could turn—and, in the years around 1600, frequently did turn—into its own theological, even racial, other.

It was obvious to any visitor that the "Turk" was not the monolith he appeared to be in theological polemics. The Sultan in Constantinople was surrounded by non-native Turks, most prominently by his Janissaries—Europeans taken as children from tributary states and raised to be the empire's elite guard. Turkish military success depended on converts to Islam more spectacularly even than, in Shakespeare's play, Venice's depends on a Moor who is, presumably, a convert to Christianity. One of the most fascinating accounts of made but not born Muslims—precisely because it takes the phenomenon so matter-of-factly—is by Thomas Dallam, an organ maker whose job it was to create and deliver a vast mechanical "present" to the Grand Signior. Dallam was an accidental tourist; all he wanted was to get his job done and get out of there; and in his unflappability (and bad spelling) he is one of the most appealing of all the English travelers. After Dallam's organ had played successfully by itself, the Sultan asked to see it played manually, and Dallam, like a more triumphant Wizard of Oz, came from backstage to find four hundred people in attendance, two hundred of whom "were his prin-cepall padgis": "Theire heades wear all shaven, savinge that behinde Their ears did hange a locke of hare like a squirel's taile; theire bearded shaven, all savinge theire uper lips. Those 200 weare all verrie proper men, and Christian borne" (69). Dallam seems equally unfazed at finding formerly-Christian Turks elsewhere: his dragoman "was a Turke, but a Cornishe man borne," and another "intarpreater, was an Inglishe man, borne in Chorlaye in Lancashire; his name Finche. He was also in religion a perfit Turke; but he was our trustie frende" (79, 84). But Dallam knows that not all renegade Christians are trustworthy. In Algiers, where he found "naked" Moors and "a great number of Jewes," he also found that the majority Turks included many "that be but Renied [renegade] cristians of all nations." These are captives who "ar compelled so to doo, or els to live in moche more slaverie and myserie. But in prosis of time, these Renied cristians do become more bererus and villanus, taking pleasur in all sinfull actions." Captives or former captives, these ex-Christians now "proule about the costes of other contries . . . to betraye cristians, which they sell unto the Moors and other marchantes of Barbarie for slaves" (14-15).13 This is a turning Turk which impels more turning, as the newly converted slaves become coastal prowlers to enslave more Christians and thereby more Muslims in potentia.
The fact is widely attested: prisoners of war and slaves (the categories are virtually indistinguishable) found that conversion to Islam could make their lives easier, or of longer duration. Many had little choice in the matter but others were more voluntary, especially, as Dallam found, along the coast of North Africa, where trade and piracy (again, the categories elide) made conversion a prudent economic move. According to one recent critic, “The extent of these conversions is uncertain, but contemporaries perceived it as enormous. William Davies, a barber-surgeon who had visited Tunis, claimed in 1614 that Turkey and Barbary contained more renegades than native Turks” (Potter 129).14 Or, as Nabil Matar puts it, “So common was conversion to Islam that by the end of the seventeenth century, Englishmen had to admit that it was as widespread as conversion to Christianity from Islam was rare” (“Turning Turk” 33).

So Othello thinks he knows what his rhetorical question means: to turn Turk is to become very bad indeed, in moral and theological ways, and what’s happening among the drunken soldiers on Cyprus is terrible. But in this loaded instance, the cliché slips out of control until it teeters on the verge of paradox, since “heaven hath forbid the Ottomites” this particular badness: in fighting drunkenly among themselves, the Venetians merely turn to their usual Christian ways; if they turned Turk, this is what they wouldn’t do. Othello’s phrase undoes the difference it intends to invoke. M.R. Ridley’s editorial note, in the second Arden edition, tries to preserve both difference and common sense: “Are we, in destroying ourselves, going to do the Turks’ job for them, now that Heaven has prevented them doing it for themselves [by destroying their fleet]?”15 It seems a stretch; the evidence from English travelers’ accounts suggests that the Koran’s injunction against internecine strife among the faithful was so widely known that Othello’s line would clearly invoke the ethnographic fact. Not “Christian shame” but Muslim duty bids “put by this barbarous brawl.” George Sandys, the poet and translator, reports that in over three-quarters of a year in Constantinople “I never saw Mahometan offer violence to a Mahometan, nor break into ill language; but if they chance to do, a third will reprove him, with, Fie, Mussel-men, fall out! and all is appeased” (Purchas 8:136). William Biddulph affirms the same for Aleppo, although there the keeping of the peace required stronger measures: “never did I see or hear of two Turks, in their private quarrels, strike one another; for, if they do so, they are presently brought before the magistrate, and severely punished. Yea; if one does but lift his hand to strike another, he is cast in prison, and kept in irons, until he has paid
some great fine, or received some other punishment." For Biddulph, the point seems to be that the Turks thereby give themselves an unfair advantage, since "they will strike Jews and Christians oftentimes, who dare not strike them again" ("Travels" in Parker 96). William Lithgow also manages to find fault in a virtue; glossing the Koran's commandments, he comes to "thou shalt not kill," which, he says, "they inviolably keepe amongst themselves; but the poore Christians feele the smart thereof" (147). But from the same phenomenon Fynes Moryson draws a shameful distinction: "But above all things they are to be prayed above the Christians, and to be imitated by them, that single fights are forbidden them by the law of Mahomet and by military discipline, upon payne of death, so as they never happen among them, as also that all brawles are severely punished as if such were unworthy to eat the Emperor's bread, who fall out with the Fellowes, whom the lawe teacheth to joyne in brotherly love, and to vent all their anger and rage upon the Common enemyes of their Country and the Laws of Mahomet" (qtd. in Poisson 69).

Though William Biddulph was unimpressed with the Muslims' putative refusal to strike one another, he could still find in Turkish practice a stick to beat his co-religionists. Not only do Muslims respect their own "churchmen"; unlike the Christians he encountered in his eastern travels, they respect English churchmen:

In Aleppo, as I have walked in the streetes, both Turkes and Moores, and other Nations, would very reverently salute me after the manner of their Country: yea, their very Souldiers, as I have walked in the Fields, with many other of our Nation, without a Janesarie to guard us, though they have beene many hundreds together, yet have they not offered either me or any of my companie wrong, for my sake, but have said one to another, Hadah Cassies; that is, This is a Churchman, and therefore take good heede that you doe unto him, for he is a good man, &c. (Biddulph in Purchas 8:262)

Biddulph claims that in all his travels in the eastern Mediterranean he was never offered any wrong except by fellow Englishmen, and then only because he was doing his duty (presumably to chastise them about actions unapproved by "the Reverend Fathers in God the Lord Bishops of our Church"). His self-serving is obvious; what's interesting is how even an English clergyman can find ways in which a turn toward the Turk isn't all bad.

For the English travelers, then, the Turk is both a proverbial examplar of wickedness and the possessor of virtues which recall
how far Christian practice falls short of Christian profession. Othello's line, too, is one small suggestion that the Turkish difference on which the play's structure stands is at least troubled and may, on occasion, collapse. The Turk-Christian dualism has been most influentially stated by Alvin Kernan in his description of the play's "symbolic geography": "The outer limits of Othello are defined by the Turks—the infidels, the unbelievers, the 'general enemy' as the play calls them—who, just over the horizon, sail back and forth trying to confuse and trick the Christians in order to invade their dominions and destroy them" (xxv). But what actual traders and travelers tended to find "over the horizon" was not always the clear line of battle between the forces Kernan finds deployed in the play—on the one hand, "Turks, barbarism, disorder, and amoral destructive powers," and on the other, "Venice, The City, order, law, and reason." For an English audience third things were likely to intrude, despite the apparent clarity of the play's structure of binaries.

For in Aleppo, as elsewhere on the stage of the Mediterranean drama, an Englishman was as likely to find diabolical otherness in Italians, Frenchmen, and Spaniards as in Turks, and to find none of the difference between Turks and Moors which Othello's suicidal gesture imposes only in order to elide. In Venice, Othello is an outsider by virtue of his blackness, a position an Englishman might equally fill there by virtue of his nationality. National rivalry figures most potently throughout this period as religious rivalry; and in Ottoman lands the infidel Muslim was not always more threatening to the Englishman than the traders, diplomats, and clergymen from Catholic Italy and France.

This was true as a practical matter of (almost literally) cutthroat economic competition. Nabil Matar discusses the case of Richard Hasleton, who "was a captive among both the Spaniards and the Algerians from 1582 until 1593": "Neither Hasleton nor his compatriots seemed to have feared the Muslims in the way they, along with the Muslims, feared the piracy and torture of the Catholic Spaniards" ("Captivity" 558). It was also true in the realm of religious controversy. The bloody history of the Reformation, in England and abroad, tended to level the distinction between Constantinople and Rome. The Muslim-Catholic homology is pervasive in English literature of the period, for instance in Spenser's syncretic imagery of Romish "paynims" in The Faerie Queene or, in a concentrated dose, in John Foxe's comparison of Sultan and Pope. Foxe acknowledges in Actes and Monuments that "if a question be asked, whether of them is the truer or greater Antichrist," the Turk wins hands-down: "But, if it
be asked whether of them two had been the more open and manifest enemy against Christ and his members; or whether of them hath consumed and spilt more christian blood, he with sword, or this with fire and sword together, neither is it a light matter to discern" (Foxe 4:18, qtd. in Mulryne 97). The Muslim who rejects Christ as savior incurs an absolute theological odium, but a Protestant might find it hard to distinguish degrees of odiousness when his rival in Islamic countries was a papist.

There's a big distance between Foxe's bitterness and an anecdote (its humor is, I presume, unintentional) by the persistently anti-Catholic traveler William Lithgow, yet the same Reformation history underlies both. It was in Constantinople that Lithgow met the master gunner of a ship from Marseilles who tells Lithgow that he "would gladly, for Conscience and Merit's sake, redeeme some poore Christian slave from Turkish Captivity" (137, my italics). The men spend two hours viewing five hundred slaves. The Englishman suggests buying an old man or woman, but the French gunner's mind is set on "some virgin, or young widdow, to save their bodies un-deflouered with infidels." Virgins being too expensive, the Englishman and the Frenchman shop instead for a cheaper widow. Lithgow's righteous indignation is spiced with voyeuristic desire:

> When we did visite and search them that were mindfull to buy, they were strip'd starke naked before our eye, where the sweetest face, the youngest age, and the whitest skin was in greatest value and request. The Iewes sold them, for they had bought them from the Turkes. At last we fell upon a Dalmatian widdow, whose pitifull lookes, and sprinkling teares, stroke my soule almost to the death for compassion. (137)

The Englishman recommends her to the Frenchman. "She is bought and delivered unto him, the man being 60 yeares of age, and her price 36 Duckets." Lithgow returns next morning to the chamber where he's left the widow and the Frenchman together, "suspecting greatly the *dissembling devotion* of the Gunner to be nought but luxurious lust" (my italics). Sure enough, Lithgow finds the lady weeping at "all the manner of his usage." The Englishman comes to her rescue. He forces the Frenchman to restore "her Christian liberty." He gets her an honest job in a tavern, for which she has nothing to give him in return "except many blessings and thankefull prayers." The moral of the story? "This *French* gunner was a Papist; and heare you may behold the dregs
of his devotion" (137). A Catholic lecher evokes as much indignation from a Scottish Protestant as a proverbially lustful Turk; and white women in Muslim lands have as much to fear from a Frenchman as from any "lascivious Moor."

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For all his resistant distinctiveness, Othello is also a representative figure in the Mediterranean drama. As what the foolish Roderigo calls "an extravagant and wheeling stranger" (1.1.139), he seems to have experienced the whole range of possibilities, including (as he told Desdemona) the region's most omnipresent danger:

I spoke of most disastrous chances . . .
Of being taken by the insolent foe
And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence . . .

(1.3.136, 139-140)

We'd love to know who took him, who sold him, who redeemed him; but the possibilities are too many where almost anyone is potentially buyer, seller, and merchandise. "Every one's price is written on his back": Christopher Marlowe's grimly comic description of the Maltese slave market is an apt motto for the ecumenical trade in human bodies throughout the Mediterranean world. In The Jew of Malta, the sellers are Christians; a Turk is more expensive than a Moor "because he is young and has more qualities"; and the Jew settles on the lean Ithamore who was born "in Thrace. Brought up in Arabia" (2.3.3). In Constantinople, William Lithgow saw "men and women as usually sold here in markets, as Horses or other beasts with us; the most part of which are Hungarians, Transilvanians, Carindians, Istrians, and Dalmatian captives, and of other places besides" (136). And in any Spanish galley he could have seen Muslim slaves, black, "tawny" or white, as well as Christian slaves from many nations, including those of the British isles.

The Mediterranean market in slaves was more circular, with the enslaver always potentially tomorrow's slave, than the Atlantic triangle which was just coming into being; the indelible association of "black" with "slave" was not yet in place. One small token of the fact is linguistic: the signifying border between slave and free was less clearly marked than it would shortly become, so that the epithet "slave" in English usage could be a generalized term of abuse, marking low status, social and moral; it could be a synonym for the equally general "villain," which similarly implicates
low birth with moral deficiency. Iago feigns indignation as he
stabs Roderigo: "O murderous slave! O villain! (5.1.61). In turn
Iago becomes the slave, as Montano pursues "that same villain,/
For 'tis a damnèd slave" (5.2.250-51). Earlier, Othello, convinced of
Cassio's treachery, wishes "that the slave had forty thousand lives!
One is too poor, too weak for my revenge" (3.3.457-58); at the end,
Lodovico pronounces Iago's punishment: "For this slave,/ If there
be any cunning cruelty/ That can torment him much and hold him
long,/ It shall be his" (5.2.342-45). Of course no one confused
these extended uses with a literal state of involuntary servitude.
But in certain respects the distinction between voluntary and
involuntary, and between a master of one social group and a slave
of another—both of which are central to the modern idea of slave-
ery—can be hard to maintain in this period. The sailor captured
by pirates or privateers and put to enforced labor became, literal-
ly, a slave; but how different was the case of the impressed sea-
man? How different, for that matter, was the case of the sailor who
subjected himself to the absolute rule of his ship's captain as a
(seeming) alternative to domestic poverty and starvation?

John Webster's two Italianate tragedies make visible the con-
nection between the involuntary servitudes of poverty and slavery.
Flamineo in The White Devil was forced to take service with the
Duke because his widowed mother had no means "To keep [him]
from the galleys, or the gallows" (1.2.316). His jingling association
of slavery and death leaves little to choose between: like the gal-
lows, the galleys (manned by domestic criminals and foreign pris-
oners of war) were great levelers. For Flamineo the ostensible free-
dom of courtly patronage turns out to be little better than forced
labor at sea: the Duke's service has made him "More courteous,
more lecherous by far,/ But not a suit the richer" (1.2.326-27). On
the one hand is slavery in the galleys, on the other is economic as
well as moral servitude to the Duke: he escapes one only to be
trapped in the other. Bosola, his dramatic counterpart in The
White Devil, also discovers how fine is the line between slavery and
patronage. Bosola "fell into the galleys"—presumably the en-
emy's—in the Cardinal's military service. Free now from foreign
servitude, he finds that there is not much difference between row-
ing for his life and working for the Cardinal in order to live. His
stunning figure for the economy of the Italian court—"places in
court are but like beds in the hospital, where this man's head lies
at that man's foot, and so lower and lower" (1.1.67-69)—makes
the sick-house of the court sound like slave-quarters at sea.

By contrast, what was the European to make of the Turkish
court, or the courts of Turkish dependencies along the North
African coast, where slaves often held positions of great power? A free-born Englishman might feel strangely mastered when he needed the protection of the Janissaries—given as child-tributes by Christian parents to the conquering Turks—to make his way safely through the Ottoman land- or cityscape. Thomas Heywood, in *The Fair Maid of the West*, has anxious fun at the expense of Clem, formerly a drawer and permanently a clown, who undergoes voluntary castration at the court of the King of Fez. But at such courts—in northern Africa, in Turkey, Syria, and Egypt—enslaved eunuchs did in fact perform high government service, a bodily deprivation enabling a form of social advancement.

The instability of Mediterranean identity—here, of Muslim versus Christian, slave versus free—is figured in the life of the great social geographer Leo Africanus. Leo was born in Muslim Granada shortly before its reconquest by Catholic Spain. A scholar educated at the royal court of Fez, and a frequent diplomatic traveler, Leo was captured by Venetian pirates on a return voyage from Constantinople. The Venetians made a present of him to Pope Leo X, who manumitted him. Leo converted to Christianity (and assumed his emancipator’s name); and with the Pope as his patron he set about writing his *History and Description of Africa*. Leo himself gives the sharpest commentary on his deracination. Of national loyalty, he holds the pragmatic opinion that “all men doe most affect that place, where they find least damage and inconvenience.” As for himself, “when I heare the Africans evill spoken of, I wil affirme my selfe to be one of Granada: and when I perceive the nation of Granada to be discommended, then will I professe my selfe to be an African” (1:189–90).

*The History and Description of Africa* is a history and description of a world with rigid distinctions of color, nationality, and religion; but it also repeatedly baffles modern, western expectations about hierarchical relationships. In the royal court of Fez “are certain Christian captives, being partly Spanish, and partly Portugal women, who are most circumspectly kept by certaine Eunuchs, that are Negro slaves”: a Moroccan king keeps white slaves who are “kept” by physically-maimed black slaves (2:482). Leo tells a story about “the Arabians in the deserts between Barbarie and Aegypt” which is bizarrely eloquent of slavery’s ubiquity. These Arabs are so miserably poor that they are forced to put their sons to pawn in Sicily, as pledges of future payment for the corn they need to buy there. “But the Sicilians, if their money be not paide to them at the time appointed, will challenge the Arabians sonnes to be their slaves.” The Arabians, who to redeem their sons are forced to “disperse thrise or fower times as the debt
amounteth to,” have in consequence become “the most notable theeves in the world.” They have also set up their own slave trade: “If any stranger fall into their hands, depriving him of all that he hath, they presently carrie him to Sicilia, and there either sell or exchange him for corn.” It’s a vicious economic cycle: the desperately poor Arabs sell their sons into slavery for corn, then purchase them back at inflated rates by enslaving others to exchange or sell in the Sicilian market.

Leo had personal experience of Arab slavers and of the circular trade in slaves: he became a buyer and then, potentially, merchandise, in an incident which recalls the Maltese motto that everyone, regardless of pigment, place, or gender, has a price on his back. The ship in which Leo was sailing was approached by an Arabian ship:

Howbeit because we durst not repose any trust in them, none of our companie would depart the ship, before they had delivered certain pledges unto us. Which being done, we bought certain Eunuchs or gelded man, and good store of butter of them. And so immediately weighing our anker we betoke ourselves to flight, fearing least we should have beene met withall by the Sicilian and Rhodian Pirates, and been spoiled not onely of our goods, but of our liberties also.

(1:160-61)

In the midst of buying slaves (and butter) from one set of pirates, Leo is already looking out for the next set, from Sicily or Rhodes, who could take possession of the whole lot—butter, eunuchs, Leo Africanus and his crew. For Leo, both before and after his conversion to Christianity, both as a citizen of Granada and of Africa, slavery was omnipresent as both risk and opportunity of the peripatetic life.

And in Othello’s fictional life too, with its “battles, sieges, fortunes . . . disastrous chances [and] moving accidents,” slavery is subtextually, or in the margins of his tale, an always present danger, but not because he is a Moor or black. But at one moment Othello’s own self-judgment transforms the indeterminate epithet “slave” into a racialized idea of being unself-possessed:

Now, how dost thou look now? O ill-starred wench! 
Pale as thy smock! When we shall meet at compt, 
This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven 
And fiends will snatch at it. Cold, cold, my girl,
Even like thy chastity. O cursèd, cursèd slave!

(5.2.281-85, emphasis added)

Othello's language makes Desdemona's whiteness, pale as her smock—"that whiter skin of hers than snow,/ And smooth as monumental alabaster" (5.2.4-5)—the vivid contrast which creates his own blackness and his condition as moral "slave." But if Shakespeare seems at such a moment to endorse the absolute-ness of the black-white binary, he more overwhelmingy makes the racist language of Brabantio and Iago the signs of their wrong-headedness or wickedness. Most poignantly, he makes us feel the pity of Othello's introjection of their values. In recalling at the final hour his former status as a (black) slave, and then by trying to kill in himself the Turk of Aleppo, Othello affirms terms of di-ference which both the play's dramatic energies and the historical record of English travelers repeatedly unfix.

From Othello's fatal Aleppo I want to move toward a conclusion approximately six hundred miles to the northwest, in Constantinople, during Thomas Coryat's visit there in 1613. Samuel Purchas's abridgement (which is all we have) of "Master Coryat's Constantinopolitan Observations" begins with a nightmarish scene Coryat witnessed, along with other visiting English, French, and Italians, at the stroke of midnight on Good Friday in the local Franciscan monastery. Nothing in Coryat's travels through Islam is more exotic than this scene of Europeans abroad. "A little after the Masse was begun, certaine fellowes prostrating themselves in the middle of the Quire of the Church, directly before the high Altar, Whipped themselves verie cruelly, and continued in the mercilesse punishment of themselves at the least an houre and a halfe." Coryat thought at first that the penitents were friars, but his Protestant reason soon reminded him that friars "love to spare their flesh though it be otherwise reported of them." The wretches Coryat saw were galley slaves "that in lieu of the punishment which they did undergoe for other men, that against Easter had confessed their sinnes, and were enjoyned a certaine [sic] for their offences, were to be released from the Gallies. This I understood to bee the Custome every yeere, that the richer sort of people having confessed their sinnes to the Priest, and thereupon required to performe such a Penance, doe procure these kind of Slaves upon condition of Libertie to undertake this punishment for them."

What's visible to Coryat is the point made more crudely by the editor Purchas, whose marginal note reads: "Herein we will allow that Popish Doctrine of merit. But these hypocrites which doe Penance by others must goe to Heaven by proxie too." Other things
are visible: Coryat sees in detail the instruments of torture and the penitents’ pain. But what remains invisible to him is the identity of the slaves, whose “Faces were covered with Canvasse vayles so that no man could perceive any of them, and all the middle part of their backe was naked which they lashed with certaine Napkins, at the ends whereof were Sitters, and againe at the end of those Sitters were inclosed certaine little sharp peeces of Iron, made like the straight part of the rowell of a Spurre, which at the very first blow that it layd upon the skinne did easily draw blood.” Coryat’s attention is drawn especially to one of the surrogate penitents, “that dealt somewhat roughly with himselfe by redoubling his blowes a little faster then the rest, did fetch off all the skin from the middle part of his backe, which was a very dolefull and tragical Spectacle, and when hee had very bitterly whipped himself, there came a certaine fellow with a Cloth in his hand steeped in Vineger, with which he wiped away the blood that it should not rankle. After which the slave continued whipping of himselfe after a very terrible and cruell manner.” Coryat ends his narrative by turning away from the anonymous actors in the gruesome scene and commenting dryly on his fellow spectators: “Amongst the divers other Gentlemen of qualitie that came thither to behold this spectacle, the French Ambassador presented himselfe with great Devotion. This severe Discipline being now ended, one of the Friers ascended the Pulpit and made a Sermon in the Italian Tongue concerning the Passion of Christ” (Purchas 10: 414-16).

Why such zeal in flaggelating himself? Why a penance so far beyond even slavish duty? Coryat knows the mind of the French ambassador and the Italian friar; but the slave, his naked back reddened with blood, his race and nationality veiled, remains a mystery. Outside the doors of the church lies the capital of the Ottomans’ Islamic empire, a place no more strange or threatening than this Christian house of God.

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The unreliability of travelers’ tales was a common joke in Elizabethan England. Conceivably, Othello’s report of “The Anthropophagi, and men/ Whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders” is a version of that joke. More likely it is a sign that the fantastic world of Mandeville’s travels to Prester John’s land and the gates of Paradise still occupied a powerful position in a mental world increasingly dominated by the rational schemes of the new geographers and—what I’ve been drawing on—the eye-witness accounts of explorers, merchants, diplomats, and adventurous tourists. The volumes of Hakluyt and Purchas devoted to
the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa reveal their own mixture of motives and modes. The common linguistic coin, spent on page after page, opposes godly Christians to Muslim Antichrists, the cruelty of Turks, Arabs and Moors to the undeserved sufferings of plain-dealing Englishmen. But Hakluyt's more revealing editorial choices are at the level of the less-inflammatory quotidian; they emphasize his nationalistic concern to encourage commerce. Examples of Muslim perfidy sit side-by-side with tips on where to catch a caravan or find a decent place to stay in the desert: all the practical information you'd need if you took up Hakluyt's challenge to go forth and multiply the export of English woolens. In this essay I have not emphasized the well-known infidel-versus-Christian side of things; instead I've tried to suggest various ways in which the English idea of Islam accommodated an awareness that the differences are not absolute. The anxiety expressed by English travelers to Othello's Aleppo is directed not only at turbanned Turks but at their fellow Europeans, at themselves.

I have taken my points of reference from Othello, whose hero bestrides the region from Venice to Aleppo. But I conclude with a quick glance at a single moment in another of Shakespeare's Mediterranean plays. In calling attention to The Tempest's Mediterranean setting I intend also to call attention to the power of new historicist criticism which, in its first decades, almost succeeded in transporting Prospero's island to the Caribbean and making Caliban an Amerindian. More recent scholarship about English encounters with Islam returns the play to its Mediterranean setting without imaginative loss. The travelers shipwrecked on Prospero's island are returning to Italy from Africa, where they have married the daughter of the King of Naples to the King of Tunis. Attitudes toward such a marriage could vary, as they do in the play. The wicked Sebastian bitterly blames King Alonso "for this great loss,/ That would not bless our Europe with your daughter/ But rather loose her to an African" (2.1.125-27). But on the optimistic reading of "good old Gonzalo," the interracial marriage is all part of the play's providential scheme of linked discoveries, in which "all of us [found] ourselves/ When no man was his own" (5.1.214-15). The most marvelous such discovery is the one which transforms a geographical cliché into a resonant term of mixed wonder and irony. Prospero "discovers" (5.1.172 s.d.) Ferdinand and Miranda on the inner stage. Miranda's "O brave new world/ That has such people in it" suddenly allows the waters of the inland ocean to mix with the waters of the western New World. Miranda discovers a new world in the old; the old
comes to a new and discovers that it is already there. For English travelers in the Islamic Mediterranean, too, the sense of things rich and strange—an alien world of religious and ethnic difference—exists along with a sense of familiarity. In the east, the English find not only the so-called other; for good or ill they find themselves where no man is his own.

Notes

1I am indebted to recent works by Matar and Vitkus which are attentive to the relational nature of identities in the discourse of Islamic-English encounters or what Vitkus calls "the porous cultural mélange that made up the Islamic Mediterranean" (Turk Plays 44). Much good work on the English Mediterranean drama has concentrated on the figure of the Moor and the idea of blackness: see Barthelemy, D'Amico, Hunter, Jones, Tokson. Kim F. Hall, remarking that in poststructuralist terms "the binarism of black and white might be called the originary language of racial difference in English culture," makes an important critique: "Interestingly, the dichotomy of black and white seems to be one of the few not taken up in deconstructive analysis" (2).

2For Stukeley and the background of Heywood's play, see Chew 524-530.

3On Fair Maid see Turner's edition and Crupi.

4Shakespeare's only other mention of Aleppo, in Syria, is equally fatal. The First Witch in Macbeth "in a sieve [will] thither sail.../ And like a rat without a tail" she'll do, she'll do, she'll do horrid things to the master of the Tiger.

5A later traveler, John Cartwright, was similarly impressed by Aleppo's diversity—so similarly that he plagiarized Eldred's account, while adding some authenticating touches of his own: "hither resort Iewes, Tartarians, Persians, Armenians, Egyptians, Indians, & many sorts of Christians, all injoying freedome of conscience... In a word this City is one of the most famous Marts of the East: the customes being pai'd by our English nation, the French, the Venetians, the huge Caravans, which come from Balsara, Persia, Mecha, are exceeding great" (8, 9).

6On Venice and the rhetoric of wonder, see Platt.

7Quoted in Strachan, 197. Cf. Richard Wrag, who visited Aleppo in 1595: "In this city, as at a mart, meete many nations out of Asia with the people of Europe, having continuall traffike and interchangeable course of merchandise one with another" (Hakluyt 6:108).

8Prominently absent from Moryson's history of the Levant trade are the Spanish, whose efforts were already directed toward the Americas. Nonetheless, English efforts in the East should be seen in the context of the contention with Spain. The English response to Spain was geographically two-pronged, and Richard Hakluyt's Principal Navigations explicitly reflects this, urging competition with Spain through expansion into the New World but equally urging more aggressive efforts to open the East to English exports.

9The OED doesn't recognize either Biddulph's "Tots" or Lithgow's "Totseks."
10 Shapiro 71 traces the genealogy of this Amis, or Ames.

11 See the studies by Matar, “Turning Turk” and Vitkus, “Turning Turk in Othello.”

12 Othello’s use of the phrase can also proleptically acknowledge the fact that in 1571 Cyprus actually had turned Turk when Ottoman forces took the island from the Venetians. It was under Turkish rule when Othello was written.

13 Dallam’s “instramente” is such a hit that the Sultan’s representatives try to bribe him in remain in Constantinople. They tell him that “the Grand Signor” will give him two wives, either two of his concubines or two virgins of Dallam’s own choosing. But despite of all temptations to belong to other nations, Dallam remained an Englishman, by pretending that he already had a wife and children at home.

14 Potter discusses Robert Daborne’s play A Christian Turned Turk. That play is among the plays edited by Vitkus in Three Turk Plays; I am indebted to Vitkus’s introduction.

15 Closer to the mark is Chew’s paraphrase: “Are we become worse than barbarians in that we do to ourselves that which heaven has forbid the Ottoman Turks to do to one another” (108). But Chew has to rewrite the proverbial “turn Turk” as “become worse than” in order to de-paradoxicalize Othello’s line.

16 Potter points out that since the Barbary coast countries “were Turkish regencies ruled . . . from Constantinople,” it is understandable that their “inhabitants were referred to in drama both as Moors and as Turks” (128). Gillies, remarking “the way in which [Othello’s] Africanness is constantly being telescoped into other forms of exoticism: Turkish, Egyptian and Indian,” claims that “Such blurring of racial outline is typical of the representation of exotics in Shakespeare and other Elizabethan dramatists” (32).

17 In a paper circulated for the World Shakespeare Conference, Valencia, April 2001, Michael Neill analyzes in detail the nuances of the word “slave” as a non-racialized term of abuse in Othello.

18 On Leo’s identity see Burton, and for the use of the term “Moor” by the translator John Pory, see Barthelemy’s excellent account (15). For the facts of Leo’s life, I have used Robert Brown’s introduction to the Hakluyt Society edition of Pory’s translation.

19 The first edition (1589) of Hakluyt included excerpts from Mandeville’s travels; the second (1598-1600) dropped them. But Purchas (1625) reinstated Mandeville—a sign that rationalism is not a linear process.

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